

**Domestic Policy Subcommittee  
Oversight and Government Reform Committee**

**The 2007 Southern California Wildfires: Assessing Preparedness, Response  
and Recovery Efforts in San Diego**

**December 10, 2007  
9:00 A.M.**

**Testimony**

**FIRE CHIEF TRACY JARMAN  
City of San Diego, California  
Legislative Testimony 2007 Firestorms**

Good day. I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this hearing. I have a lot to share and a number of misconceptions to clear up.

I am frustrated that every time there is a major firestorm that comes through the San Diego region..... San Diego City finds itself alone...on our own for the first 24-48 hours to fight the firestorm. Let's be clear.....these fires start out in the east county area and blow into the City of San Diego. This was the case in the 2003 Cedar Fire and the case again with the 2007 Witch Creek Fire.

I need to set the record straight. Well in advance of both the Cedar and Witch Fires reaching the City limits, the City Fire-Rescue Department had requested additional firefighting resource assistance. In both cases, we were told that there were none available. Let me reiterate that **WHEN WE REQUEST ADDITIONAL FIREFIGHTING RESOURCE ASSISTANCE (AS I DID THIS LAST FIRE – A 150 STRIKE TEAMS) WE WERE TOLD THAT THERE WERE NONE AVAILABLE!**

However, at the same time we are expected to and often send engine strike teams out to assist other fire agency requests within the County of San Diego. It is unfortunate, but looking to the future I will now have to reconsider the commitment of our firefighting resources to other areas of San Diego County. I don't say this lightly, but you must understand that my primary responsibility is to provide the highest level of fire protection services possible to the citizens and visitors of the City of San Diego. That being said and based on recent history, I may need every available City firefighting resource here within the City to fulfill this responsibility. You need to be aware that historically, the County of San Diego has and still lacks the firefighting resources necessary to protect its residents and visitors during significant firestorms.

In a previous hearing the blame and burden seemed to be placed primarily on the City of San Diego to solve this regional issue; specifically, the immediate availability of additional fire

suppression resources. I reiterate this is not a City of San Diego problem to solve. This is a much larger regional issue and solving this issue is the responsibility of the County, the State, and potentially the Federal government.

Sure I can build 22 more fire stations within the City that will help us on our day-to-day responses. But those fire stations and personnel are **not** going to make a substantial difference when a Santa Ana firestorm blows into our City. 22 additional fire stations would provide me with 5 additional strike teams...not nearly the firefighting assistance I need when I am requesting a 150 engine strike teams like I was during the Guejito-Witch Creek Fire.

During the recent Malibu Fire, dubbed the "Corral Fire", I was told that there were 45 engine strike teams available to suppress this 4,000 acre blaze. Realize... I had a total of 10 SDFD strike teams in Rancho Bernardo for a 9,250 acre fire. This was more than twice the size of the Corral Fire with a quarter of the resources to fight it.

I am exceptionally proud of the job our firefighters did in saving nearly 6,000 homes. It's also important to note that there were neither lives lost nor any major injuries to firefighters or citizens within the City of San Diego. I need to reiterate that we, the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department were there in force when the fires burned into the San Pasqual Valley and Rancho Bernardo communities. Our firefighters fought the fire aggressively and never gave up. At the peak of the fire we had deployed 480 San Diego City firefighters, more than half my Department was on the fireline. The community knows this and our firefighters know this fact well.

We welcome being a part of the regional solution. Although we are by far the largest firefighting agency in the County, the City of San Diego Fire-Rescue Department should by no means be considered a "silver bullet" with a responsibility to provide a majority of the additional firefighting services needed in this County.

I acknowledge the greatly improved cooperation between Federal, State and local fire agencies. This is a vast improvement over our experience during the 2003 Cedar Fire, but we still have a long way to go. As the City, we are not going to get there alone nor should there be an expectation that the City should shoulder the entire burden. It is not fair to the City or its citizens. Other fire agencies and local governmental jurisdictions need to step up and share in the responsibility of helping resolve the regional issues.

Within the City we are continuing to make incremental progress. Tomorrow, just like in October, if another wildfire were to blow into and through the City, we have identified the resources necessary for our being more effective. We need to request additional firefighting resources to assist us with the ground attack. I have long advocated for additional reserve engines to be placed with fire agencies throughout the region. During the 2003 Cedar Fire, the City of San Diego Fire Department had only 12 reserve engines available. For the Witch Creek Fire, we had brought that number up to 18 reserve engines. **THIS IS STILL NOT ENOUGH!** We have off-duty firefighters that are immediately available to serve, but we lack the fire apparatus to put them on during a firestorm. That's why I have long supported the effort to place 50 or more additional fire engines within the San Diego County region with the understanding that they are to remain here, within the region, **NO MATTER WHAT IS OCCURRING**

OUTSIDE THE REGION. Let me make it clear these 50 additional engines would NOT be the obligation of the City of San Diego, but rather the State of California as was proposed by the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission after the Cedar Fire 4 years ago.

I am continuing to educate the public of the harsh reality that when the Santa Ana winds are predicted to blow, they materialize first in the counties north of us. Once a wildland fire or fires start to burn north of us, the availability of firefighting resources begins to draw down immediately. As we just experienced, in a matter of hours, this drawdown dramatically affects the level of fire and rescue protection we can provide our communities. Our State Mutual Aid system is the best in the world, but it is not designed nor can it support the level of resource drawdown that occurs once the firestorms begin.

Although I have grown tired of explaining to all that inquire, I will continue to share openly that you can expect that the next time firestorms hit Southern California and the San Diego Region needs additional firefighting assistance, there will be none available. And when resources are finally made available, it will be too late! The fires will have blown through, the houses will be destroyed, and we will be in the mop up stages once again trying to explain to the citizens why their homes burned.

I welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with the local, state and federal agencies to better position this region for the next fire storm. No question, it will happen again and likely sooner than any of us expect! My hope is that next time we will be better prepared as a region.

#### **A comparison: 2003 Cedar Fire vs. 2007 Witch Creek Fire**

- The initial duration of the Witch Creek Fire was three days; the Cedar Fire, less than one day. The wind speed during the Witch Creek Fire was 45 to 80 miles an hour; the Cedar Fire 35 to 45 miles an hour.
- The Witch Creek Fire, as I've said, destroyed 365 homes and damaged 79. The Cedar Fire destroyed 335 structures, 71 others were damaged. The Cedar Fire burned a total of 280,278 acres in the county; the Witch Creek Fire burned 197,990 acres overall. Both fires occurred in late October during Santa Ana winds; the Witch Creek Fire on October 21, the Cedar Fire October 25.
- Evacuations during the Witch Creek Fire were carried out by the Reverse 911 system, San Diego Police and Fire, and the news media. During the Cedar Fire, evacuation notification was handled by police, fire and the media.
- The Witch Creek Fire was one of 21 fires burning in Southern California at the time it started, including the Harris Fire in the southern part of San Diego County. At the time of the Cedar Fire, there were 15 fires in Southern California, including the Paradise Fire in the Escondido area.

#### **Brush and Vegetation Management/Fire Safe Design Issues**

While brush management is not a silver bullet to fight wildfires, it does help by decreasing fuel loads and providing more defensible space. After the 2003 Cedar Fire, the City updated its brush management regulations to require more defensible space between open space and structures on both publicly and privately-owned property. Based on this expansion of the defensible zone, there are now approximately 1,180 acres of urban inter-face City open space property that requires brush management. It should be noted that the City's proposal was met with significant opposition from the local environmental community as well as the California Coastal Commission. In order to get the new plan adopted, the City was required to purchase approximately 700 additional acres of open space outside of the brush management zone that would be precluded in future brush thinning activities and is still working with the Coastal Commission to gain approval of the 100 feet of defensible space within the coastal zone.

Additionally, for over 5 months of the year, brush management is not allowed in coastal sage scrub during the California gnatcatcher nesting season, March 1 through August 15. This small bird only lives in coastal sage scrub habitat, which is a predominant feature of San Diego open space areas well inland of the coast, and is listed as a threatened species by the federal government. Any harm to this bird could result in fines and penalties.

Using the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1144 Standard for Reducing Structure Ignition Hazards from Wildland Fire and the Wildland/Urban Interface Code-Danger Rating System, the City's Fire-Rescue Department prepared a brush management priority list as part of a fire risk analysis they conducted of the City's wildland and urban interface areas. Of the over 400 open space parcels within the City, 21 parcels, totaling 122 acres, were identified as the highest risk. The analysis addresses the potential for rapidly moving and intense fires and the ability of the San Diego Fire Department to fight a fire based on quantifiable risk factors and proximity to resources.

- The rating system includes five factors:
  - Density of vegetation
  - Slope severity
  - Five minute response time
  - Road class
  - Proximity to fire hydrants

Park and Recreation brush management staff has nearly completed thinning these 122 acres of highest risk open space parcels. The City is on track to complete the thinning of these parcels by the end of December at which time the Park and Recreation Department will continue the program by targeting the parcels with the next highest risk next.

### **Potential Federal Government Assistance**

In 2005, the City applied for a \$2.7 million Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Disaster Mitigation Grant to complete brush management in three high-risk areas of the City. To date that grant has still not been approved but recent discussions with FEMA indicate the grant should be approved soon. If done soon, the City's work crews will be able to finish brush management in these targeted areas prior to the start of the next fire season.

Even with the FEMA grant, there is still significant acreage requiring brush management. It is the City's intention to pursue a FY 2009 appropriation through the Natural Resources Conservation Service to obtain additional grant funding for brush management of the City's open space areas within the 100 foot defensible space zone.

Brush management alone will not prevent wildfires from destroying structures in another fire storm like we just experienced. It is important that homeowners invest in structural improvements to provide their property with additional safety features to reduce the risk of loss. The federal government should consider offering tax incentives to private property owners who make improvements to prevent wind-blown embers from gaining access to their roofs and/or attics. Such enhancements include: replacement of wood shingle roofs; boxed eaves; louvered attic vents that can be closed manually from the outside of the home; and the replacement of wooden decks, fences or storage sheds near the structure.

### **Evacuation Procedures/Reverse 9-1-1**

In addition to the traditional evacuation notification tools, the City of San Diego used their "Reverse 911" system. This is a web-based, community-alert notification system designed to make mass telephone calls to the public in a timely manner during emergencies or disasters. The system uses a combination of databases and GIS mapping technologies to quickly target and effectively disseminate emergency notification calls to a precise geographic area.

The City of San Diego purchased Reverse 911 as another tool to rapidly broadcast emergency notifications to the public in the event of an emergency. The system hardware, software and three-year contract cost \$180,000. The system was paid for with Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) Homeland Security grant funds.

When activated, the Reverse 911 system uses the 911 telephone database to initiate a voice mail broadcasted message via landline telephones to San Diego residents and businesses in the affected areas. A taped message delivers instructions on how to proceed during the ongoing emergency. Individuals using non-landline cellular and VoIP phones can also register their numbers online to receive the emergency calls.

It is estimated that mandatory evacuation orders affected a total of 200,000 people within the City of San Diego. Approximately 78,000 Reverse 911 calls were made in the course of executing those evacuation orders. The following communities were evacuated: Black Mountain Ranch, Carmel Mountain, Carmel Valley, Del Mar Heights, Miramar Ranch North, North City/Fairbanks Ranch Country Club Area, Rancho Bernardo, Rancho Encantada, Rancho Penasquitos, Sabre Springs, San Pasqual, Scripps Ranch, Torrey Highlands, and Torrey Pines.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.